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A word cloud visualization featuring various terms associated with neoliberalism. The most prominent words are "neoliberalism" (large orange letters), "enterprise" (green), "lives" (purple), "principles" (blue), and "individuals" (green). Other visible words include "research", "existing ways", "competition", "work", "psychic", "anxieties", "feelings", "power", "inequalities", "life", "political", "live", "psychoanalytic", "economic", "Equality", "social", "insecurity", "neoliberal", "entrepreneurial", "emotional", "personal", "affairs", "also", "possibly", "minor", "gender", "and", "the", "of", "with", "to", "from", "by", "for", "on", "at", "in", "out", "into", "through", "without", "under", "over", "above", "below", "between", "among", "against", "towards", "within", "across", "along", "around", "near", "far", "close", "distant", "inner", "outer", "central", "peripheral", "core", "margin", "edge", "front", "back", "side", "end", "beginning", "middle", "last", "first", "next", "previous", "following", "before", "after", "during", "since", "until", "as", "while", "when", "where", "how", "why", "what", "who", "which", "whose", "whom", "whether", "if", "unless", "even", "though", "because", "so", "but", "or", "nor", "yet", "still", "never", "always", "sometimes", "often", "rarely", "usually", "typically", "generally", "specifically", "particularly", "especially", "most", "less", "more", "fewer", "greater", "smaller", "larger", "bigger", "smaller", "tiny", "huge", "enormous", "vast", "immense", "limitless", "boundless", "infinite", "eternal", "transient", "temporary", "permanent", "lasting", "short-lived", "long-lasting", "brief", "prolonged", "extended", "abbreviated", "condensed", "compressed", "expanded", "stretched", "contracted", "relaxed", "tightened", "loosened", "strengthened", "weakened", "reinforced", "diminished", "enhanced", "improved", "worsened", "better", "worse", "good", "bad", "right", "wrong", "correct", "incorrect", "proper", "improper", "appropriate", "inappropriate", "suitable", "unsuitable", "fitting", "unfitting", "relevant", "irrelevant", "important", "unimportant", "significant", "insignificant", "meaningful", "meaningless", "valuable", "valueless", "precious", "cheap", 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My empirical study, which is based on over 60 in-depth interviews with individuals who lead their lives according to enterprise principles, attempted to address this gap in existing research. My [research](#) identified ten contours that characterise the ways in which neoliberalism is lived out. According to these findings, individuals:

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Relate to themselves as if they were a business;

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Embrace risks like enterprises and consider knockbacks useful learning experiences;

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Present themselves as capable managers of difficulties and hide weaknesses;

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Are not exclusively guided by the principles of enterprise;

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But rarely discuss wider social structures, such as inequalities;

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Direct desires for change and feelings of anger away from the social sphere;

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Transform social critique into self-critique;

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Demonstrate feelings of self-doubt, insecurity and anxieties;

---

Compete with themselves, and not just with others;

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Reject those who are not entrepreneurial by drawing strong boundaries between 'lazy' and 'deserving' people.

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My findings resonate with the existing research in several ways by, for example, showing that anxieties are prevalent. Yet my research reframes existing knowledge by suggesting that competition is increasingly self-directed. While this is not to say that competition with others no longer exists, it is to highlight that the self increasingly competes with itself – whether this relates to hours worked, exercise done or calories consumed. This is not only an interesting observation, but also one that is meaningful sociologically as it suggests that 'power' or 'ideology' work on a 'deeper' level. If competition is mainly directed at the self, there is an absence of external standards, which may render competition potentially limitless.

This new perspective expands our understanding of the different ways in which competition may manifest itself in contemporary societies. Crucially, my analysis has not shed light on all the possible ways in which neoliberalism may affect our emotional lives. Some aspects, such as consumption, are absent from my discussion and may need further investigation. I do, however, hope that my research represents the beginning of a larger, and empirically informed, conversation about the psychic life of neoliberalism.

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## About the Author

**Christina Scharff** is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King's College London. She is author of [Repudiating Feminism: Young women in a neoliberal world](#) (Ashgate) and, with Rosalind Gill, co-editor of [New Femininities: postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity](#) (Palgrave Macmillan).



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